Tennent, Timothy G. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007. 295 pages.

**Biographical and Historical Information**

Timothy Tennent is President and Professor of World Christianity as Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Prior to arriving at Asbury in 2009, Tennent taught world missions and Indian studies at Gordon-Conwell Seminary since 1998. Additionally, Tennent has been an adjunct professor at the New Theological College in Dehra Dun, India, teaching off and on for the past twenty years.

Tennent writes in the context of global Christianity, having himself experienced the theological perspectives of majority world Christians. Until recently, the majority of published theological works have come from the West or from theologians educated in western seminaries. Tennent states that, “We are now in the midst of one of the most dramatic shifts in Christianity since the Reformation. Christianity is on the move and is creating a seismic change that is changing the face of the whole Christian movement” (2). Tennent is referring to the introduction of theologies written from believers who have experienced persecution, war, and famine. These believers address theological issues not commonly found in systematic theology textbooks. A type of ground level theology is produced to provide biblical guidance for issues like demon possession, polygamy, ethnic reconciliation, poverty, ancestor worship, and believing in the midst of dominant non-Christian societies. Tennent’s exposure to and experience with non-western cultures and first generation Hindu background believers grounds his thoughts and
insights and adds weight to claims made in the book.

Summary

Tennent writes that his objective is to integrate the fields of theology with missiology, done so in a way that shows how the expansion of global Christianity can serve as a positive influence on how the West thinks about theology (xvii). Essentially, the author seeks to broaden the theological perspectives of both students trained in seminaries using philosophical categorizations of theology founded in the Enlightenment and students approaching theology from an experience based perspective. Tennent has chosen eight topics common to systematic theology and examines each in a non-western context.

Tennent begins with a broad look at theology itself, the study of God. The global comparison is between the standard Christian view of God and the Islamic view of Allah. Tennent’s question is, “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” (27). Essentially, Tennent concludes with a yes and no answer. Etymologically and ontologically, Tennent concludes that Yahweh and Allah refer to the one true God. The basis for this statement is that if indeed there is only one God and everything else is less, any name for the one true God is referring to the God of the Bible (48). However, the attributes or predicates associated with the Christian and Islamic use of God or Allah vary significantly. There are a number of shared predicates such as God is one, God is powerful, and God is creator. However, the areas and attributes the God of the Bible possesses that Allah does not are of such a crucial nature that Tennent concludes God and Allah are not the same. Specifically, knowing Jesus as God is the essential element necessary to correctly identify the one true God (44).

Tennent tackles bibliology, or the study of the Bible next. The rise of believers coming from an immediate non-Christian background led Tennent to consider how these new
believers regard the sacred texts of their former religion (53). Does or should the Hindu Upanishads, for example, play into the biblical interpretation done by Hindu background believers? First, Tennent surveys the Bible and finds extensive use of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament. He also finds a common source, “Q,” used to unite much of the gospel literature. Finally, he finds use of extra biblical, non-Christian texts in the letters of the New Testament (56-57). Tennent concludes that New Testament writers were familiar with the other religious texts of their day. On occasion, parts of those texts were incorporated into the New Testament to provide a contextual bridge for understanding biblical revelation.

Tennent extends the conclusion to other cultures today with two lessons. The first is that believers should avoid a broad condemnation or naïve acceptance of non-Christian texts. The Apostle Paul used other texts when necessary and did not overtly condemn them. Next, Christ does not arrive in any culture as a complete stranger. Because of general revelation, biblical themes appear in many of the world’s sacred texts. Tennent cautiously encourages believers to make appropriate use of secular texts and traditions as a bridge to the gospel but in no way is the material in those texts inspired by God (73).

Tennent next examines anthropology, specifically human identity in eastern shame-based cultures. Honor and shame are among the most important values in eastern cultures. Typically, the western understanding of the atonement focuses on our guilt before God and more of a courtroom declaration of our innocence in Christ. Tennent contends that the atonement also covers the shame incurred through sin and rebellion against God and that using a shame-based approach to sharing the gospel is more appropriate in eastern contexts. Sinners were once identified by guilt and shame but now have a new identity in Christ and are partakers in his righteousness and honor before God (101).
In chapter five, Tennent explores Christology in the African concept of Christ as healer and ancestor. African based religions often emphasize the role of the shaman and spirits in relation to human disease. Additionally, departed ancestors continue to influence the living and can bring both sickness and healing. Tennent contends that western Christology focuses on Christ from above and emphasizes his personhood, deity, nature, and substance. African Christology is done from below and emphasizes Christ’s power and victory over demons and sickness. Tennent concludes that a more balanced approach is needed where the deity and nature of Christ are presented with his ability to meet everyday needs. An overly spiritualized Christology is not appealing or helpful in the African context (132).

Tennent writes on soteriology in chapter six. He presents a fascinating comparison of salvation by grace through faith present in Christianity with a particular strand of Buddhism emphasizing the same theme. True Pure Land Buddhism (TPLB) teaches that one man reached enlightenment and now provides the path to enlightenment for anyone who will come to the realization that there is nothing they can do to earn merit and escape this world. Essentially, one must come to the end of himself, receive grace from Amida to be able to utter the Primal Vow, and then receive a transference of merit sufficient to reach the Pure Land.

While there are many similarities between TPLB and Christianity, Tennent concludes they are fundamentally different in nature. TPLB’s conception of sin is vastly different than the biblical definition. The object of faith in TPLB is not Jesus Christ. There is no evidence or certainty that Amida or the Pure Land ever did or now exists. Finally, TPLB teaches there was a time when man was able to save himself. This is what Amida did and he now offers salvation to others who cannot save themselves. This idea is fundamentally different from Scripture where all men are fallen and only by God incarnating in Jesus Christ can anyone be saved (158).
Tennent tackles pneumatology in chapter seven. The church in Latin America is quickly growing, particularly churches under the influence of Pentecostalism. Typically, Pentecostals affirm the authority of the Bible, the central work of Christ for salvation, and the need for repentance, conversion, and holy living (165). Tennent seeks to find what we might learn from Pentecostal believers around the world. He concludes that their desire for ecumenism and a ground level, every day approach to Christianity is a necessary challenge and corrective to isolated, theoretical, and propositional western Christianity. We must wed the Protestant view of continuing in truth by the Word with the Pentecostal desire to continue in life by the Spirit (189).

The focus of chapter eight is ecclesiology, specifically whether insider movements within Islam are legitimate. Tennent overviews the C-Spectrum for contextualization and concludes that the C-4 model is most faithful to Scripture. He contends that many of the evidences used to support C-5 are actually describing C-4 churches. Tennent’s prime fault with the C-5 model is that of identity. He states that “one’s religious identity with Jesus Christ should create a necessary rupture with one’s Islamic identity, or else our identity in Jesus Christ would mean nothing” (217). In summary, Tennent believes that C-5 believers have not severed their identity as a follower of Allah and Mohammed in a clear enough manner to be true to their new identity in Christ.

The content of the final theological issue relates to eschatology. Tennent compares the eschatology of Jonathan Edwards with the Chinese Back to Jerusalem Movement (BTJM). Both Edwards and the BTJM share a strong sense of optimism regarding the expansion of the church prior to the millennial reign of Christ (240). Tennent concludes that such an eschatology encourages believers that human history is going somewhere. Both found themselves in a season of great ingathering of believers and were motivated to join with God, share the gospel, and
anticipate the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (246).

**Critical Analysis**

In light of the distinct subject nature of each chapter, it is best to analyze the book by exploring its strengths and weaknesses. Tennent writes from a conservative, evangelical point of view but applies classic theology in a variety of world contexts. Such an approach carries both insight and danger.

**Strengths**

The most notable strength of Tennent’s work is his application of theology to real and specific global contexts. Many authors write of the need to do theology from the majority world perspective or deride philosophical western systematic theology as unhelpful for most of the world but they never make a specific case to prove their assertions. Tennent examines eight theological issues and relates them to crucial topics in missions today.

Of specific interest is the insider movement controversy explored in chapter eight. Many mission agencies and journals like *Missions Frontiers* strongly support and advocate C-5 contextualization. It is refreshing to read Tennent’s thorough research and insight on the issue. Tennent’s conclusion that self identity lies at the heart of the issue is right on. He states that for C-5 believers, Islam is not in their background; rather it remains their primary identity (201). Identity and allegiance are at the core of the contextualization issue. Tennent’s specific application of ecclesiology in this context provides groundwork for a fruitful discussion.

Another strength is the thorough research Tennent has done to support his findings. Each chapter contains a large bibliography, showing Tennent has done his homework. The fruit
of his research also helps the reader know where to look to learn more about the topic. Tennent
does a good job of presenting both sides of each topic and attempting to be as fair as possible in
his explanation of views. In the chapter on theology, Tennent has researched and included key
terms in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic. Such depth is necessary in order to understand the
etymology of Allah and its counterparts (28-29). Although the book is well researched and of a
scholarly nature, Tennent’s writing style is easy to follow and understand. Probably the most
difficult chapter to remain clear in is the chapter on soteriology. Tennent presents the
terminology, history, and theories of various strands of Buddhism in a clear and succinct manner.

Furthermore, Tennent’s chapters are well organized and provide helpful introductions
and conclusions. The summary conclusions help the reader to review and cap off the chapter and
provide a good take away thought. Personally, learning through a comparison of positions, as
Tennent often writes, is very helpful. For example, Tennent compares True Pure Land
Buddhism with the views of Martin Luther in chapter 6. He compares the eschatology of
Jonathan Edwards with the Back to Jerusalem Movement in chapter 9. Comparing material with
which I am unfamiliar with material I am already familiar with lessens the learning curve while
reading the text. Chapter one provides a nice overview of Christian history to set the stage for
the emergence of global Christianity today. Chapter ten concludes the book by challenging
western readers to learn from majority world theologians. The book fits together well, which is
unusual, considering the diversity of theological topics covered.

A final strength is the general corrective and admonishment for western theologians
to listen to and learn from majority world believers. Tennent writes that every time he visits the
seminary in northern India to teach, he leaves with a sense of excitement and encouragement
because of what he learns from the students and how they model their faith in the midst of
persecution (7). Simply put, western theologians are missing out in multiple ways if they do not travel abroad to teach and learn from those of a different background.

Tennent is always seeking a balance, however. He does not overly criticize westerners for their ethnocentrism, nor does he carry any demeaning tone when describing characteristics of global theologies he opposes. He sees the flaws of Latin American Pentecostalism in their trend toward the prosperity gospel, outlandish interpretations of certain Scriptures, and the sometimes immoral leadership found within that movement (189). He also sees the contributions majority world theologians can make on issues like homosexuality, poverty, and suffering because of their immersion in those contexts.

Tennent concludes there is a universal nature to biblical truth that translates across cultures. There is also that same universal truth applied in specific contexts. Many times, those specific contextual applications give insight to the universal topic and everyone can learn something about the nature and work of God in the world. It is these specific insights Tennent has sought to and succeeded in bringing to the forefront in his work.

**Weaknesses**

It appears that Tennent chose the major issues prominent in the majority world today when writing the book. He is to be applauded for the range of topics he presents. One helpful addition would be the role of oral theology in global contexts. With close to seventy percent of the world’s population preferring an oral style of learning, Tennent’s omission of the topic proves immense. For example, how is theology formulated and understood in cultures lacking written Scripture? How is teaching done in oral contexts? Though each of the eight topics presented is examined from a global context, the arguments are still philosophical and based largely on reason. Oral peoples with a different learning style would not benefit from the design
of Tennent’s book. It would be a fascinating addition to the book if Tennent would include a
chapter on theology in oral contexts as a major challenge to the Western view of understanding
and doing theology.

The only other critique I have is that Tennent paints the Back to Jerusalem movement
in the most positive light. Certainly, the faith, endurance, and action of the Chinese believers are
to be commended. What Tennent glosses over is the tendency of some eschatologically driven
missiologies to do slash and burn evangelism where the gospel is shared widely but little follow
up is done. Many of the major house church networks in China are suffering from unhealthy, if
not heretical doctrines. For example, one network claims that if repentance is not accompanied
by weeping, the repentance is not genuine. Fast moving bands of evangelism teams are not
enough to ensure the church will remain until Christ returns, even if his return is only a few years
away.

Additionally, in the early zeal of the Back to Jerusalem movement, thousands of Chinese
believers rushed to Muslim lands with no cross-cultural training. Many met their deaths
unnecessarily because of the cultural offense they brought with the gospel in an attempt to push
the gospel back to Jerusalem. I remember reading the book on the movement and finding
statements indicating the readiness and expectancy of massive martyrdoms in order to complete
the spread of the gospel. This persecution is sure to happen, especially given the tendencies of
the remaining unreached people groups, but to rush in untrained and lose thousands
unnecessarily is not desired. Tennent would have done well to include at least a few of the
dangers associated with eschatological missiology.

Conclusion

Overall, Tennent has produced an excellent book on the interface of theology with
missiology. The eight theological topics focus on some of the most pressing issues in global Christianity today. Tennent’s application to real contexts provides a base for understanding and applying theology. Tennent’s balanced and fair approach to each topic is to be applauded. The fact that a seminary president in the United States is so in touch with the needs of global Christianity is encouraging.

I pray that Tennent’s influence continues to be felt beyond the walls of his own school. His background, education, and experience allow him a vantage point few possess. When he humbly calls for western theologians to open their eyes and learn from the majority world, he does so because he himself has humbly learned from the majority world. Christianity truly is a global and universal phenomenon. The gospel is translatable into every culture. Each culture requires a unique application, however. Allowing these cultures to then have a voice at the global theological discussion is essential for everyone else to benefit from their cultural insights. The result is a more balanced theology worldwide and one that better meets the needs of the lost world.